

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES REVIEW GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Georgia was the eighth State to participate in a Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). This review was conducted in accordance with section 1123(A) of the Social Security Act and sections 1355.31 through 1355.37 of Title 45 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). The U.S Department of Health and Human Services, through the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), is charged with the responsibility for reviewing federally-funded child and family services programs to determine the States' substantial conformity with State plan requirements and other requirements under Titles IV-B and IV-E of the Act.

The CFSR is a process in which ACF, in partnership with States, monitors and evaluates child and family services, including child protective services, family preservation and support, foster care, independent living and adoption services. The first phase of the CFSR consisted of the development of a State Profile, derived from data for Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 1999 contained in the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and for calendar year 1999 from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). The profile highlighted key performance indicators related to safety and permanency for children entering the child welfare system. From this profile and other sources of information, Georgia developed a Statewide Assessment (SWA), which described the process, procedures and policies of its child protective services, including foster care and adoption. This SWA also focused on the systemic factors in place, which enable the State to carry out the program.

The second phase involved an on-site review, conducted in three counties and in the capital of Atlanta the week of July 16, 2001. The purpose of the on-site review was to assess the quality of services to abused or neglected children and to verify the information contained in the State Profile and SWA. This was accomplished by an intensive examination of 50 cases, drawn at random, of children who were active in the system during the period under review (April 1, 2000 through July 15, 2001). The cases were divided between foster care and protective service (in-home) cases.

Forty-two reviewers and team leaders, operating in two-person (State/Federal) teams, reviewed and rated the services provided these children and their families, in relationship to the three goals of safety, permanency and well-being. The ratings were derived from documentation in the case records as well as from interviews with those involved with the cases, such as parents, caseworkers, foster parents, service providers and, when appropriate, the children themselves.

Individual and group interviews were also held in the four sites with more than 100 selected stakeholders who had the knowledge and experience to describe and assess the child and family services system. They included foster parents, judges, district attorneys, defense attorneys, caseworkers and their supervisors, guardians ad litem, police, and advocacy group representatives. The primary purpose of these interviews was to assess independently the quality and efficacy of the systemic factors described in the SWA.

The results of the SWA, the on-site case reviews and the stakeholder interviews were compiled by the review team into this report and were used to make a determination about Georgia's substantial conformity with regard to each of seven outcomes related to safety, permanency and well-being, and each of seven systemic factors.

Substantial conformity is based upon the State's ability to meet national standards; the criteria related to outcomes for children and families; and the criteria related to the State agency's capacity to deliver services leading to improved outcomes. Ninety percent of the cases must be rated as "substantially achieved" during a State's initial review for the State to be in substantial conformity for the outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS RELATING TO SAFETY, PERMANENCY AND WELL-BEING

In order for the State to be considered in substantial conformity on any given outcome, the outcome must be determined to be substantially achieved in 90 percent of the cases reviewed in the first review. In addition, the State must meet the national standard that has been established for any statewide aggregate data attached to that particular outcome.

I. SAFETY

Status of Safety Outcome S1-Not in Substantial Conformity

Safety Outcome 1

Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect

Georgia met the national standards in **repeat maltreatment**. The State did not meet the national standards in **maltreatment of children in foster care**, 90% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved. Eighty-eight percent of the cases reviewed were rated as strengths in: **timeliness of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment**, while 91.5% of the cases reviewed were rated as strengths in the area of **repeat maltreatment**.

Strengths:

Record reviews and interviews with stakeholders indicated an emphasis on safety that currently exists within the Georgia Department of Family and Children Services DFCS. In almost all the records reviewed, investigations of reports of abuse and neglect were initiated timely, within the appropriate 24-hour or five-day response time stipulated by the State Agency (depending on the

seriousness of the report). There were indications that appropriate priority levels were assigned to almost all of the investigations in the cases reviewed.

There were no reports of repeat maltreatment during the period under review. Record reviews indicated the agency's emphasis on protection and safety resulted in prompt removal of children from harmful environments, therefore, minimizing episodes of repeat maltreatment.

Areas Needing Improvement:

Case record reviews and interviews with stakeholders indicated that lack of resources to attract and retain experienced staff impacts on its ability to effectively utilize information gathered through family assessments. Interviews with stakeholders also revealed that significant turnover of staff has impact on the caseworkers' ability to conduct thorough assessments and identification of underlying issues requiring attention. Record reviews revealed long histories of repeat maltreatment in some cases prior to the period under review.

Safety Outcome 2

Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate

Status of Safety Outcome S2-Not in Substantial Conformity

77.5% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved.

Strengths:

Record reviews and interviews with stakeholders revealed that provision of home-based services, such as: Homestead and Parent Educator are effective in supporting families. There were indications that a broad array of services including family counseling, parenting, home organization, alternate forms of child discipline and behavior modification techniques has proven to be beneficial to parents and children and often prevent removal. Case record reviews also revealed that in many instances, case managers arranged for unique services or resources that are based on individual family needs (PUP).

Record reviews also indicated that efforts were made to prevent risk of harm to children either through removal or supervised visits; and in situations where children were not in imminent danger, adequate assessment of home situations were conducted, while appropriate services were recommended.

Areas Needing Improvement:

Case reviews and interviews with stakeholders indicated that in some cases mental health services were not readily available to families. In some of the records reviewed, there were indications that in-home services, particularly public services, were not readily available to families.

Stakeholders expressed concerns about the safety of children in shelter care, particularly in the larger metropolitan area. Interviews conducted revealed that security measures are not in place to prevent children and others from wandering in and out, medical needs are not met, and shelters are located in high-risk neighborhoods.

II. PERMANENCY

Status of Permanency Outcome P1-Not in Substantial Conformity

Permanency Outcome 1 Children will have permanency and stability in their living situation

Status of Permanency Outcome P1-Not in Substantial Conformity

Georgia met the national standards on **foster care re-entries** and **stability of foster care placements**. The State did not meet the national standards on **length of time to achieve reunification** and **length of time to achieve adoption**. A rating of substantially achieved in Permanency Outcome 1 was found in 71.42% of the cases reviewed.

A data discrepancy occurred in the performance indicator, **stability of foster care placements**. The national standard is 86.7%. The three county on-site review determined that only 70.3% or 19 out of 27 cases were rated as strengths on this particular performance measure. In order to resolve this discrepancy, the State would have had to submit additional data to show that **stability of foster care placements** meets the national standards, or, ACF together with the State would jointly review additional cases from the original sample pulled for the Georgia review, using only those indicators for which the discrepancy occurred. The State of Georgia, Department of Human Resources, informed ACF that it acknowledges the two options provided to resolve this discrepancy, and accepted the indicator as not substantially achieved.

Strengths:

Record reviews indicate that there were no multiple re-entries into foster care during the review period. There were indications from some of the records reviewed, that there were stable foster care placements for several years' duration. Reviewers also noted that the agency pursued termination of parental rights within ASFA (Adoption and Safe Family Act) guidelines in some of the cases reviewed, and found that a number of diverse ILP (Independent Living Program) services were available and provided to the youth.

Record reviews revealed that the agency makes effective use of Foster/Adoptive homes, and noted that the goal of other planned permanent living arrangements was used appropriately, through the provision of extensive services relating to goals and regular reviews of service plans.

Areas Needing Improvement:

Stakeholders emphasized the need to expand reunification services, pre-placement services, early intervention services to prevent placements and the need for other placement resources, such as, guardianship, long term foster care by agreement and emancipation. There were indications that children with multiple serious needs that require intensive services were left with no adequate support services, and in some cases, workers provided referral services only after they were requested by foster parents.

Records reviewed also identified delays in filing TPR (Termination of Parental Rights) by workers in court, or documented the compelling reasons why TPR was not filed according to the stipulated guideline. In one site, reviewers identified lengthy time periods to initiate TPR (Termination of Parental Rights), finalize adoptions, and a lack of adequate attention given to children in stable placements.

Permanency Outcome 2

The continuity of family relationships and connections will be preserved for children

Status of Permanency Outcome P2-Not in Substantial Conformity

75% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved.

Strengths:

Record reviews indicated that efforts to maintain continuity with school participation were good, and that most placements outside the child's community were based on the best interests of the child. There were indications that concerted efforts to place siblings together were made by the caseworkers. The reviewers noted that in cases requiring separation of siblings, the workers conducted thoughtful up-front assessments.

Record reviews also indicated that emphasis was placed on sibling/parent visits. There were findings in some of the records reviewed that information about the child's origin was preserved through the availability of a "life book" with pictures of the family of origin and other important information in their lives. Records reviewed also indicated that all required relative placements were explored and evaluated before children were placed in their homes. In all three sites, reviewers noted that strong agency efforts were made to facilitate visits/relationships, even if biological parents refused to cooperate.

Areas Needing Improvement:

Stakeholders commented on the need to increase the pool of foster parents, in order to place children and siblings in closer proximity to their families and communities, and help them connect with the best available adults to care for and love them. Stakeholders also commented on the need to support foster parents with adequate training that equips them with the tools needed to provide care for children with special needs and behavioral problems.

In one site, stakeholders reported that excessive caseloads and staff turnover affects the ability of workers to schedule adequate visits with parents and siblings in foster care. Reviewers noted that in some cases, visits by other available family members were not fully encouraged. Reviewers found that more appropriate contacts, such as telephone or visits were lacking between the children in care and their biological parent in cases where the parents were either incarcerated, or in residential treatment facilities.

III. CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

Well-Being Outcome 1

Families will have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs

Status of Well-Being Outcome WB1-Not in Substantial Conformity

72% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved.

Strengths:

Stakeholders indicated that the DFCS staff is extremely committed to children and frequently go the extra mile to see that children receive services needed to meet their needs. Case records documented that the case managers discussed case plans with parents and their progress toward the stated goals when visiting the family.

Areas Needing Improvement:

In all three sites, there are issues around provision of appropriate services for needs related to mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence. Records reviewed also indicated that Family Group Conferencing was not clearly reflected in the cases reviewed. Reviewers also found a need to make contacts with children more meaningful and more individualized to the cases. There were indications that high caseloads prevent case managers from visiting as often as needed.

Well-Being Outcome 2
Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs

Status of Well-Being Outcome WB2-Not in Substantial Conformity

75.7% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved.

Strengths:

In some cases reviewed, children had educational success due to direct involvement of DFCS or foster parents, or parents attending to needs.

Areas Needing Improvement:

At the state level, stakeholders reported that children's educational needs should be incorporated better in state plans, and that more advocacy is needed with the school system.

Well-Being Outcome 3
Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs

Status of Well-Being Outcome WB3-Not in Substantial Conformity

63.2% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved.

Strengths:

At the state level, stakeholders reported that the state has capacity for health coverage for all children through Peachcare and Medicaid, and the state is making diligent efforts to get children enrolled in Peachcare. Interviews with stakeholders also reported that strong partnership exist between DFCS and the Division of Community Health. Stakeholders reported good collaboration with over 100 local agency teams statewide plus a state level team where private and public sector agencies and families come together to staff cases and look at local resources.

Areas Needing Improvement:

Stakeholder's interviews identified the need to connect children with health coverage, such as; Peachcare and Medicaid, and the need to obtain the health option for youth over age 18. Case record reviews indicated lack of follow through on needed mental health services even when assessments are completed.

At the state level, stakeholders reported that mental health issues present a big challenge. There is concern around the need to improve early intervention.

KEY FINDINGS FOR SEVEN SYSTEMIC FACTORS

IV. STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Status of Statewide Information System: Not in Substantial Conformity

Area Needing Improvement

The GA DHR does not have an operational statewide information system. IDS (Internal Data System) is designed to capture the required data elements and can produce the information required by regulation, namely, status, demographic information, location and goals of children in foster care. However, IDS is difficult to use, therefore, some counties do not input data. As a result, the data is inconsistent and unreliable.

V. CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Status of Case Review System: Substantial Conformity

Strengths

- Court hearings and administrative reviews were held timely. Citizen Review Panels conduct periodic reviews.
- The Federal time frames were met for the permanency hearing. However, there is some evidence of continuances and the hearings do not always address the key permanency issues.
- The provisions for TPR are in place and there has been an increase in filing for TPR's. It was noted that there are delays in filing in some cases.
- Family Group Conferencing has proven to be an excellent model to increase family participation in the case planning process.

Areas Needing Improvement

- Although most of the cases reviewed contained written case plans, some indicated little involvement of parents and children in the development, lacked specificity and individualization for services.
- There were numerous delays by the Special Assistant Attorney Generals (SAAGs) in timely filing petitions for termination of parental rights and delays in the hearing of petitions filed due to limited court docket time and routine granting of continuances.
- Although foster parents, preadoptive parents, and relative caregivers are receiving notice of hearings, there is inconsistency in the method of notification. Some received a phone call, while others received written notification.

VI. QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Status of Quality Assurance System: Substantial Conformity

Strengths

- Counties adhered to licensing standards, which are in place and applied to all homes licensed by DFCS.
- The State's quality assurance review process of social services began in 1991. In February 2000, the Evaluation and Reporting Unit expanded the review to include 100% of all ongoing Child Protective Service cases, active Foster Care Cases and active Foster Homes. These reviews have been completed in 15 counties, including all the urban counties in Georgia. The Consultation and Support Unit works with counties to develop corrective action plans as a result of the 100% case reviews.

Area Needing Improvement

- There was no evidence that information obtained by the Evaluation and Reporting Unit is used to provide relevant reports and evaluation of program improvement measures implemented.

VII. TRAINING

Status of Training: Substantial Conformity

Strengths

- Georgia Academy, a private contractor, provided basic training to all new workers until July 1, 2001. As of July, the State began training in a newly developed training unit. This change was in response to the field's dissatisfaction with the former new worker training.
- BITE (Basic Investigative Training and Education) is highly effective ongoing training, which involves cross training of other partners.
- Foster parents were generally satisfied with the MAPP training. A few reported that it did not adequately deal with or prepare them for the issues associated with adolescent foster children.
- The State is collaborating with a consortium of schools of social work to improve educational opportunities for the staff.
- The State implemented a 15-day mentoring program for new supervisors. However, some supervisors expressed frustration in getting supervisory training too late.

Area Needing Improvement

- Some stakeholders noted that training is often too theoretical and not adapted for practical application.
- Additional courses are offered throughout the year on an optional basis, however, the courses should be made available to all counties and not just in specific urban areas.

VIII. SERVICE ARRAY

Status of Service Array: Not in Substantial Conformity

Strengths

- There were examples of exemplary services that assessed the strengths and needs of families and children to determine their service needs. These services enabled children to remain safely with their own parents while other services promoted permanency for foster and adoptive children. Some examples of these services are Homestead, Community Partnership for Protecting Children, MATCH (Multiagency Team for Children), PUP (Prevention of Unnecessary Placement), and First Placement/Best Placement.

Areas Needing Improvement

- The most critical service need is the availability of foster homes for the medically fragile and adolescents.
- The greatest obstacle to the provision of individualized services was the failure to conduct comprehensive assessments when cases were opened.
- There was a shortage of substance abuse treatment centers.
- There is a lack of availability of mental health services for families and children.

IX. AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

Status of Agency Responsiveness to the Community: Substantial Conformity

Strengths

- The Child Welfare Advisory Committee, an expansion of the Child First Committee, was established to work with the State on its CFSP.
- DFCS has several efforts underway to involve community stakeholders in the formulation of plans to improve services to children and families. Several of these initiatives were begun in the wake of recent media reports critical of the agency in the area of protective services.
- Advocacy groups played an important role in securing additional funding from the State Legislature this year for additional positions and salary increases.
- At the county level, joint training is held with CPS and service providers such as mental health workers, school counselors and law enforcement officers.

- In 148 of the 159 counties, DFCS works closely with Family Connections which is a network of service providers established to resolve substance abuse and family issues, such as domestic violence.
- DHR hosted several statewide forums in order to secure the collaboration of community stakeholders in assessing needs and joint planning. These forums have led to increased collaborations with courts and judges, and better working relationships with community resources.

Area Needing Improvement

- There is a lack of coordination with law enforcement around child abuse or neglect investigations, indicating the need for joint development of protocols.
- There is concern about DFCS's ability to serve a large and growing Hispanic population. A shortage or absence of Spanish speaking caseworkers has presented serious communication problems and points to the need for DFCS to diligently recruit bilingual staff.

X. FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT LICENSING, RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Status of Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment and Retention: Not in Substantial Conformity.

Strengths

- Licensing standards have been implemented and were applied uniformly to relative and non-relative homes.
- The State complied with all Federal requirements for criminal background clearances.
- The State established a Resource Development Unit to provide a policy structure for recruitment of foster parents.
- There is an initiative with Casey Family for retention and recruitment of foster parents.

Area Needing Improvement

- The biggest challenge is the lack of placement resources. In the larger county, this causes overuse and overcrowding of the emergency shelter.
- The State has a process in place for cross-jurisdictional placement but the effectiveness of the process could not be determined from the onsite review.
- Licensing standards for the public and private sector are different. Private agency foster family homes and group homes used by DFCS must be both licensed by ORS and approved by DFCS. Public homes and shelters are approved by DFCS. There must be one licensing standard applied to both the public and private foster homes and shelters.
- Local county directors grant waivers of the minimum standards for foster homes that exceed the required number of six children because of the lack of placement resources. This sometimes compromises the safety of the children in the home.